

Nasty Woman: Hillary Clinton's Media Coverage and Choices in the 2016 Presidential Election

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Abstract: 2016 came to be one of the most influential elections in recent American history; following eight years of the first black president, Hillary Clinton was the first woman to become the first presidential nominee of any major party in the history of the United States. On November 8, 2016, she received 65 million votes, winning the popular vote but losing the presidency. Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton and her opponent, Republican nominee Donald Trump, faced off in a town hall-style debate on October 9th, 2016. Just a few days prior, an Access Hollywood tape had been released to the public, wherein Trump bragged about committing sexual assault. Quickly in the debate, Trump's behavior devolved and within only a few minutes, he began pacing, huffing, pointing, and looming behind Clinton. Situated within a context and climate unfriendly to female politicians, Clinton was faced with a choice. Either she could ignore Trump's behavior and hold onto her composure or she could stand up to him and tell him to back off. The country and the world watched this profound moment that encapsulated one of the most significant themes of the campaign in which Clinton's role as the first female presidential nominee by a major party placed hundreds of years of gender norms front and center. Stuck in a classic double bind, Clinton made the decision to keep quiet and ignore Trump. The implication of this double bind is that women vying for power and leadership must choose between being perceived as either too aggressive or too meek for the job, and two hundred years of precedent have supported the notion that the American presidency is a man's job. Of course, although Clinton won the popular vote by 2.8 million votes, Donald Trump won the Electoral College, and thus, the presidency (Begley 2018). As we move forward into an age in which more and more women and other marginalized groups assert themselves in politics, we must reckon with how we talk about women's ability to lead in comparison to men.

The Election

On November 8th, 2016, over 65 million Americans cast their votes for the first female presidential nominee of any major party in the history of the United States (Krieg 2016). As the hours unfolded and the polls closed, those 65 million Americans waited in anticipation for what so many perceived as inevitable – the first female President of the United States. Slowly, the night wore on and it became increasingly clear that the hopes of those Americans would not be realized. All around the country, women cried as they mourned the loss of what they had desperately hoped would finally come to fruition.

Almost exactly a month before election day, Clinton and her opponent, Republican nominee Donald Trump, faced off in a town hall-style debate. Trump's campaign had just been

dealt a major blow with the release of an Access Hollywood tape, wherein he bragged about committing sexual assault. The debate was vital for each candidate: Clinton wanted to secure her lead and further derail Trump's campaign while Trump looked to improve his image by maintaining a calm and collected appearance. Quickly, however, Trump's behavior devolved and within only a few minutes, he began pacing, huffing, pointing, and looming behind Clinton. Situated within a context and climate unfriendly to female politicians, Clinton was faced with a choice to either ignore Trump and hold onto her composure or stand up to his behavior and tell him to back off. The country and the world watched this profound moment that encapsulated one of the most significant themes of the campaign in which Clinton's role as the first female presidential nominee by a major party placed hundreds of years of gender norms front and center.

Hillary Clinton

Hillary Clinton was born October 26, 1947 in Park Ridge Illinois, the eldest of three children in a middle-class family. Her father, Hugh, was a World War II veteran and a "rock-ribbed Republican" who "worked hard and wasted nothing" (The Office of Hillary Rodham Clinton 2018, n.p.). Her mother, Dorothy, began working at age 14, abandoned by her parents. Clinton would later talk about how her parents inspired her to work hard and use her voice. Clinton's childhood was "happy and disciplined" and "her parents encouraged her to study hard and pursue any career that interested her" (White House 2014, n.p.). She attended public school, where she was a Girl Scout, member of National Honor Society and active in her church (The Office of Hillary Rodham Clinton 2018).

After graduating from high school, Clinton went on to attend Wellesley College, where she became active in pursuits of social justice, led the Young Republicans Club, and served as president of the student government. She studied political science and graduated with high honors and was also named a Durant Scholar, the college's highest academic honor. During her senior year, she was elected by her peers to be the first student speaker at commencement, where she remarked that "the challenge now is to practice politics as the art of making what appears to be impossible, possible" (White House 2014, n.p.).

Clinton went on to attend Yale Law School, where she served on the Board of Editors of Yale Law Review and Social Action and interned with children's advocate Marian Wright Edelman. Clinton also met her future husband, Bill Clinton, during their time at Yale (White House 2014).

After graduation, Clinton went on to work for the Children's Defense Fund in Massachusetts, work which was instrumental to the passage of legislation requiring states to provide quality education for students with disabilities (The Office of Hillary Rodham Clinton 2018). She also served as a member of the impeachment inquiry staff during President Nixon's impeachment and advised the House Judiciary Committee following Watergate. After failing to pass the D.C. Bar Exam and passing the Arkansas exam, Clinton decided to move to Arkansas with Bill, where she began teaching criminal and constitutional law at the University of Arkansas School of Law in 1975 (Savranksy 2016; The Office of Hillary Rodham Clinton 2018). She also joined the Rose Law Firm, the third oldest firm in the country, where she represented disenfranchised people as the firm's first female associate and partner (Rose Law Firm 2018). She married Bill in 1975, and in 1980, their daughter, Chelsea, was born.

Clinton's Political Career

Clinton became First Lady of the United States in 1992 when Bill Clinton won the presidency. In this role, she worked to improve educational standards and healthcare access. During her tenure, she “forced [the country] to address the role of women in power in new ways” (Black 2001, 18). As a lawyer and an activist herself, Clinton enthusiastically took on policy initiatives expanding health coverage and public health education in her role as the chair of the Task Force on National Health Care Reform. She worked with Republicans and Democrats to help create the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), insuring over eight million children (The Office of Hillary Rodham Clinton 2018).

In 1995, Clinton led the U.S. delegation to Beijing for the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women, where she delivered her famous remark: “Women's rights are human rights” (Clinton 1995). Her public involvement with policy initiatives was somewhat unconventional and unprecedented, putting her in the same category as Eleanor Roosevelt, as a First Lady who was involved in politics on her own and became famous for it, not just because of the achievements for her husband. Although Roosevelt was not the first First Lady to write a book or influence legislation, she was one of the first to do so visibly, and Clinton had a similar approach to the role (Black 2001). As media coverage swirled around talk of a “copresidency” and the Clintons' stamina, Clinton became a “litmus test for...the nation's unsettled attitudes about working women, political ideology, and family values” (Black 2001, 19).

Among the defining features of Bill Clinton's presidency was his affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky and the subsequent fallout (Owen 2000). He was impeached by the House of Representatives on charges of perjury and obstruction of justice, although he was acquitted in the Senate. Bill's affair shaped the way the public interacts with the apparatus of the presidency through the media and particularly “underscored the complexity of the mass media's role in relation to leadership in the era” (Owen 2000, 1). As Hillary Clinton began making strides in her own career, Bill's affair and impeachment also came to be a defining feature of the rhetoric surrounding her political career and later campaigns. The affair was also a major point of contention during the 2016 election as Trump used the assault accusations against Bill to deflect attention away from his own acts of sexual assault.

In 2000, Clinton stepped out on her own on the national stage in her campaign to become a United States Senator for New York, which she won by a large margin. During the campaign, the Clintons moved to Chappaqua, New York, where they live today. She continued her fight for accessible healthcare by forging bipartisan relationships with other Senators and working to expand TRICARE¹. After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, Clinton secured \$20 billion toward the rebuilding efforts in New York (The Office of Hillary Rodham Clinton 2018). Clinton entered office with a 60% approval rating, which fluctuated between 47% and 57% during her tenure, eventually reaching 48% when she left office in 2008 (Pew Research Center 2015). For context, politicians typically strive for approval ratings greater than 50%.

Clinton served for two terms in the Senate, followed by her first campaign for the presidency in 2008. When Clinton announced her intent to run for president, she enjoyed an approval rating of 55%, which dropped during the campaign (Pew Research Center 2015). The fact that it dropped the longer she remained on the campaign trail potentially indicates that she is more likeable in the public eye when she is not campaigning or presenting as ambitious. Although there are many explanations for Clinton's loss in the primary to then-Senator Barack Obama,

¹ TRICARE was created to expand healthcare coverage for members of the National Guard and Reserves and their families. Today, TRICARE provides healthcare to servicemembers, retirees, and their families around the world. See TRICARE n.d. for more information.

including her major loss in Iowa, the media coverage biased against her certainly played a role. For example, she experienced greater levels of exit talk, “undertheorized pressures that second-place contenders for presidential nominations face to exit the race,” than her historical counterparts (Lawrence and Rose 2011, 1). Coverage also relied on sports metaphors and language of violence. For example, the Democratic primary was compared to a basketball game, and when President Obama won the nomination, commentators suggested that he had succeeded in “neutering” Clinton (Parry-Giles 2014). Coverage that suggested she was “forcing her way onto the ticket” framed her as too outspoken and empowered, violating gender norms (Parry-Giles 2014).

Barack Obama nominated Clinton as Secretary of State in 2008, and the Senate approved her in 2009. Although her tenure is mostly remembered for the Benghazi attack in which four high-ranking U.S. officials were killed, she accomplished major feats to improve the United States’ standing on the global stage, working to restore relationships with the European Union and Asian and Latin American allies. Many also commend Clinton’s service championing women’s rights globally. She “persistently connected the dots between women’s rights and major foreign policy concerns such as global economic development, food security, extremism and political stability” (Coleman 2013, n.p.). Everywhere she went around the world, she pointedly met with women and worked to implement systemic changes at the State Department to ensure a focus on women’s rights after her service ended. Her service is also marked by allegations that she used personal email accounts on a private, governmental email server, an allegation that arose in 2015 and went on to define her 2016 campaign for the presidency. During her tenure, Clinton enjoyed an approval rating between 66% and 52%. Her approval rating sat at 65% when she testified to Congress on the Benghazi attacks, indicating that a great majority of Americans approved of her performance in the office (Pew Research Center 2015).

In 2013, following her time as Secretary of State, Clinton joined the Board of Directors at the Clinton Foundation, which was established in 1997 by Bill Clinton. This 501(c)(3) works “on issues directly or with strategic partners from the business, government, and nonprofit sectors to create economic opportunity, improve public health, and inspire civic engagement and service” (Clinton Foundation 2018, n.p.). She teamed up with Melina Gates at the Gates Foundation to launch the No Ceilings Initiative to advance rights and opportunities for women globally (Clinton 2017). She also launched a program called Too Small to Fail to promote the importance of early childhood development and cultivated a network of wildlife conservation organizations with her daughter, Chelsea. Despite the fact that the Clinton Foundation had wide bipartisan support and was endorsed by CharityWatch, GuideStar, and Charity Navigator, her involvement with the Foundation was scrutinized in the 2016 election. During the campaign, nearly twice as much was written about the Clinton Foundation as there was on any of Trump’s scandals, and nearly all the coverage was negative (Clinton 2017).

Coverage of Female Politicians

Women have faced scrutiny in the political arena since their participation began as far back as 1872, 50 years before women won the right to vote, when suffragist Victoria Wood ran for president (Smith 2013). Since the founding of the United States, the office of the president has been masculinized, along with every other office of elected and appointed officials. With terminology like “founding fathers” and the powers of war granted unto the president, America’s collective consciousness of today continues to assign heteronormative importance to the presidency. Candidates must therefore “display their adherence to the dominant paradigm of gender performance” to prove their viability (Smith 2013, 243-244). For women, this presents a

double bind; they are required to perform femininity while also displaying leadership skills that have been masculinized in the collective consciousness.

Women seeking political power have to balance gender expectations with their political merit, walking the line between desirable feminine qualities and traditionally masculine political qualities. Women also face the issue of underrepresentation in the media, which impacts their desirability in the eyes of the electorate (Falk 2010). The media favor men not only in the amount of coverage they receive, but in the type and tone of coverage they receive. Women who are covered like men are considered more viable (Kahn 1992).

Women face a paradox in choosing how to present themselves during their campaigns. Women who exhibit more masculine traits may increase the perception of their confidence and competence, but they run the risk of being perceived as bossy, bitchy, and overbearing. On the other hand, female candidates who exhibit expected feminine traits like compassion and warmth may be more accepted but may not come across as viable leaders. Women are perceived to be more competent on “compassion issues” such as poverty and education whereas men are considered more competent on issues concerning security and the military (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993). Both men and women are compelled to adopt some traits of the opposite gender’s stereotype, but the difference is that men are certain to appear more desirable to voters when they come across as compassionate, whereas women’s adoption of aggression and confidence is much riskier. Historically, both male and female candidates who consistently perform masculinity win races (Sykes 2008).

Candidates generally also must strive to portray themselves as being situated solidly in a nuclear family, which is an extension of the dominant masculine paradigm that candidates must fulfill. For men, this role is easy to fulfill; powerful, breadwinning father figures are natural fits for offices constructed as patriarchal and God-given (Smith 2013). For women, however, the requirement of membership in a traditionally nuclear family presents something of a paradox: women’s traditional role in the hierarchical family is secondary and submissive, which are not desirable traits in the highest political office in the nation.

The presidency especially “exist[s] as a function of public expectations and cultural gender roles” (Uscinski 2013, n.p.). Scholars note:

Rendered largely invisible until the late twentieth century, the raced and sexed control of political and social power and institutions by white men has rested upon naturalized hegemonic gender and race ideologies that make disparate and denigrating treatment seem ordinary and acceptable to those with entrenched power advantages (Duerst-Lahti 2008, 733).

Although gender has always been tied to the informal criteria for presidents, gender’s role in politics was brought to national public attention in 2008 with Clinton’s first campaign for the presidency. With the creation of the office of the president 300 years ago, the role was masculinized when an elite man, George Washington, took the job. For hundreds of years to follow, this norm has been upheld. “Since then, presidential campaigns have always been about what kind of man should hold an office predicated upon masculinity,” although this qualification lies largely outside the public consciousness (Duerst-Lahti 2008, 733). “Presidential elections do not exist in a vacuum but grow out of historical practices, social and political power structures, belief systems, and a particular time and space in history,” and Hillary Clinton faced the daunting

task of passing as a likeable woman while commanding respect and embodying toughness (Duerst-Lahti 2008, 734).

Historically, presidential campaigns have used several “tropes” of ideal manhood that have remained common in the public consciousness since the birth of the nation (Smith 2013, 10). Men like George Washington, Ulysses S. Grant, and Dwight D. Eisenhower all fulfill the ideal of the “warrior hero” by converting military and battlefield leadership into political power. The role of the “self-made man” is defined by the imagery of a rugged frontiersman rising to prominence through his own intelligence and strength, and is embodied by men such as Andrew Jackson, Theodore Roosevelt, and even contemporaries Ronald Reagan and Barack Obama. The “beneficent patriarch” is an image which justifies the founding father ideology and stems from a place of paternal judgment, love of country, and familial duty. Men like Lyndon B. Johnson and Mitt Romney play into this trope (Smith 2013, 11). All of these ideals further reinforce the unspoken and understood qualification of performed masculinity for access to power, not to mention the unspoken and only recently upended requirement of whiteness.

In 2008, coverage of Clinton attacked her looks, laugh, hairstyles, pantsuits, sex appeal, ambition, and tenacity, and drew upon disrespectful and misogynistic clichés and stereotypes (Farmer 2008). Some of the comments called her “castrating, overbearing, and scary,” a “she-devil,” “scolding,” “nagging,” “cackling,” “brittle,” and “unfeminine” (Farmer 2008, 4). It wasn’t until a comment was made about Chelsea being “pimped out” that Clinton sent a public letter to NBC executives saying that they needed to be held accountable for their behavior (Farmer 2008).

Clinton’s coverage in 2016 constituted a continuation of these long-held trends. However, her coverage did break with tradition in some key respects. The media lacked a category for Clinton, who was at once a political outsider, given her gender, and a political insider, given her years of experience and former role as a First Lady, “sitting at the cusp of a transformative event” (Luecht 2016, iv). She received more coverage than female politicians traditionally do, but her coverage was decidedly more negative and personal than that of her competitors (Miller, Peake, and Boulton 2010). Along with the challenge of being the first female presidential nominee of any major party, Clinton faced the same double bind in 2016 that she had faced since the inception of her political career.

2016 Presidential Campaign

Clinton was no stranger to the biased coverage she would receive if she ran for president in 2016. She later remarked that she was so hesitant to run not only because she knew it would be an uphill battle given the state of the country, but also because she foresaw the rumor-mongering that she would face on everything from her age, her health, and her activities in the private sector. Regardless, she decided to run, because despite all the downsides, “it was something too important to pass up...a chance to do the most good [she] would ever be able to do” (Clinton 2017, 52).

Clinton officially announced her intent to run for president in April 2015. The election cycle that followed was nothing short of spectacular, reflecting the will of an irrevocably divided populace. Even after years of job growth under President Obama, middle-class Americans in the Rust Belt were still losing manufacturing jobs and felt largely ignored by politicians in Washington, D.C. Millions of Americans had grown tired of the way politicians had been handling the country for the last eight years and were ready for a massive overhaul of the status quo, as is evident in calls to “drain the swamp” and rid D.C. of corrupt politicians (Mannes 2016). Racist rhetoric on the campaign trail echoed the nationalist sentiments that began stewing with the birther

movement² spearheaded by Trump himself during President Obama's term. Voters in 2016 were primed to think about gender. Since the 2012 presidential election wherein Republican nominee Mitt Romney proclaimed that he had "binders full of women," Republican representatives has made visible their "War on Women," attempting to curtail access to abortion and define "legitimate rape" (Smith 2018, 203).

Less than a month after Clinton announced her intent to run, Senator Bernie Sanders, an Independent from Vermont, announced his candidacy for the Democratic nomination. The Republican primaries were divided initially between 17 candidates, although the unprecedentedly large field eventually narrowed to John Kasich, Ted Cruz, Jeb Bush, Marco Rubio, Ben Carson, and, of course, Donald Trump. Basing his credibility on references to his tenure judging beauty pageants, his three marriages and five children, his experience as a rich and powerful businessman, and his footwear and penis size, Trump won the Republican nomination as the most aggressively masculine candidate (Smith 2018). His success was also contingent on his emasculation of other candidates, evidenced by his attacks on Ted Cruz's wife and his use of the nickname "Little Marco Rubio."

Of the 330 stories run about Clinton across major media outlets during the primary, 300 were negative in tone, whereas Sanders received mostly coverage that was positive 83 percent of the time (Stein 2016). In July 2016, Clinton earned the Democratic nomination over Sanders, becoming the first woman to win a major party's nomination for president. The media coverage that followed the primaries, pitting Clinton against Trump, was bitter and biased. She had to face multiple double standards and walk a thin line between seeming arrogant or confident, professional or uptight, and experienced or corrupt. In comparison, Trump was able to seemingly do or say even the most outrageous things, while simultaneously remaining a clear contender for the presidency.

Clinton tried to run a campaign focused mostly on policy initiatives that drew on her years of experience. She espoused the importance of raising middle-class incomes, increasing equity for gender minorities, improving the broken scaffolding of the Affordable Care Act, and reforming campaign finance laws. Her campaign slogan, "Stronger Together," exemplified her intent to bridge the gap in American politics. However, as a because Clinton wanted to step outside of the norms expected of her and seek the highest role of power historically reserved for men, she had to present herself in traditionally feminine ways (Smith 2018).

Trump's campaign drew on deep-seated fears and resentments that his base had been holding onto for years. His nationalist sentiments centered around immigration reform, trade reform, and the draining of the political "swamp" in D.C. (Mannes 2016). His slogan, "Make America Great Again," which he copyrighted almost immediately after Mitt Romney's loss in 2012, called for a nostalgic vision of the past in which white men held comfortably onto power that is now perceived as being chipped away by minorities³.

Donald Trump's campaign also centered on ad hominem attacks against Clinton, calling her "Crooked Hillary," raising questions about her mental and physical health, stoking conspiracy theories linking her to a Washington, D.C. pedophilia ring, and questioning her performance as a

² The birther movement was a racist and xenophobic movement started by Donald Trump in 2011 when he asserted that President Barack Obama lacked U.S. citizenship and called for the release of his birth certificate, which Trump at times said he doubted existed. Trump did not abandon these claims until 2016. No evidence has ever suggested that President Obama is not a citizen. See Barbaro 2016 for more information.

³ The slogan was obviously an almost identical take on President Ronald Reagan's 1980 slogan, "Let's Make America Great Again." Reagan ascended to power during a similar time in American discourse when women's roles were changing, resulting in a crisis of masculinity. Both used the slogan to recall a fictional time in which American masculinity was not threatened by women or people of color, and both won on their promises that they would return the country to this imaginary golden age. See Smith 2018.

wife. Beyond simply raising doubt in her viability as a candidate, Trump even called for punitive action against the woman who challenged the gender hierarchy (Smith 2018). Chants at his rallies called to “lock her up” and shirts worn by his supporters proclaimed, “Hillary for Prison.” A common point during the campaign was that he would work to have Clinton incarcerated when he won, although he backed off on this threat after he was elected. (Stevenson 2016). At a campaign rally where he suggested that “Second Amendment people” could do something if Clinton were elected, his supporters cheered (Corasaniti and Haberman 2016).

Social media played an unprecedented role in the election, segueing from the more traditional radio and television advertising, which first brought political campaigns into the domestic space. A trend started in 2008 with President Obama’s campaign strategy, Clinton and Trump each utilized social media to communicate with harder-to-reach segments of their bases and maintain a constant presence in the public’s consciousness. Clinton used Facebook and Twitter to make arguments for policy initiatives, and Trump used his Twitter account to defame and attack his opponents, giving them such nicknames as “Crooked Hillary,” “Low Energy Jeb,” and “Lying Ted.” Clinton attempted to stay above the fray, until Trump tweeted an attack against her endorsement by Obama, to which she responded, “delete your account” (Victor 2016, n.p.). Other, less-censored, corners of the internet like 4chan and Reddit also proved to be instrumental, especially in Trump’s campaign, where supporters formed a microcosm of vitriol.

Trump’s unconventional campaign strategies earned him plenty of attention in the press; in fact, the press frequently wrote about him and he had far more earned media than any other candidate⁴. Although he spent much less money than other candidates on his campaign, researchers estimate that he leveraged about \$400 million worth of earned media in February 2016, more than candidate John McCain spent on his entire 2008 campaign. In contrast, in the same month, Clinton received less than \$200 million worth of earned media (Confessore and Yorish 2016). Clinton later wrote that “it was impossible to ignore Trump” because “the media gave him free wall-to-wall coverage” (Clinton 2017, 7).

Two major scandals plagued Clinton’s campaign from the beginning, both from her time as Secretary of State: Benghazi and the unsecured email server. In June 2016, FBI Director James Comey dismissed the investigation into her email use, saying that “no reasonable prosecutor” would bring a case against Clinton because no breach of security occurred. However, the investigation was later reopened days before the general election. During the campaign, Clinton repeatedly apologized and took full responsibility for her mistake (Zurcher 2016). As for Benghazi, a US House Select Committee found, through an investigation including the deposition of Clinton, that the State Department failed in many ways to protect Americans overseas (U.S. Congress 2016). However, the Republican-led committee found no evidence of wrongdoing on the part of Clinton (Herszenhorn 2016). Both the media and the public seemed unable to let these two moments from Clinton’s long career go, despite Clinton’s eagerness to discuss policy issues.

Further, the press seemed to concentrate more on her hair, her pantsuits, and her demeanor than her stance on policy. As the campaign wound on, Clinton faced more misogynist remarks, eventually going on to reclaim them as part of her campaign strategy. For example, after being called a nasty woman by Trump during a debate, millions of women adopted the term “nasty woman” as something of a badge of honor. A foundation called Pantsuit Nation⁵ emerged in

⁴ Earned media is defined as media coverage given to a candidate for which they did not pay (Confessore and Yorish 2016).

⁵ Pantsuit Nation began as a Facebook group in 2016, recalling Clinton’s infamous, iconic, ridiculed, and revered pantsuit. In 24 hours, the group gained 24,000 members and currently has 3.8 million members. Today, the nonprofit has chapters around the country dedicated to connecting members with opportunities to get involved in political activism in their communities and share their stories. See Pantsuit Nation 2018.

October 2016, just before Election Day, to encourage women to wear pantsuits to the polls and create a space for a more “engaged and equitable democracy” (Pantsuit Nation 2018).

In contrast, Trump only seemed to gain popularity as he made increasingly misogynistic and racist comments, calling women “pigs” and Mexicans “rapists.” On October 7, 2016, an Access Hollywood tape was made public in which Trump openly bragged about assaulting women in 2005. “I better use some Tic Tacs just in case I start kissing her. You know, I’m automatically attracted to beautiful women. I just start kissing them. It’s like a magnet. You just kiss. I don’t even wait. When you’re a star they let you do it. You can do anything. Grab ’em by the pussy. You can do anything” (Farenthold 2016, n.p.). Although Trump and others would later excuse his comments as “locker room talk,” his objectification of women’s bodies and suggestion that his status would excuse any assault is nothing short of abhorrent.

October 9, 2016: Town Hall Debate⁶

Two days after the release of the Access Hollywood recording was made public, Trump and Clinton faced off in their second debate of the campaign. After the first debate, each candidate had plenty of room for improvement. Trump was highly agitated, interrupted Clinton, and raised his voice. He also remarked that Clinton lacked stamina. Clinton was clearly better prepared, but she didn’t necessarily get a chance to show it, as she spent much of the evening baiting Trump and trying to fact-check him rather than speaking on her own ideologies, a strategy that she frequently deployed in her campaign. The town hall-style debate on October 9, 2016 was more relaxed than the first. It was moderated by Anderson Cooper of CNN and Martha Raddatz of ABC.

The climate of the campaign was also decidedly nastier by the time the second debate rolled around. Indeed, when the debate began, the two refused to shake hands, breaking with tradition. Although his goal was to remain calm and maintain his composure, Trump was certainly on the offensive, considering the Access Hollywood tape’s leak and its impact on his campaign. The debate quickly devolved into personal attacks and allegations.

The first question asked whether Clinton and Trump felt they were modeling appropriate and positive behavior for the country’s youth. Clinton’s response echoed the sentiments of her campaign slogan, “Stronger Together,” and called on Americans to lift each other up, celebrate diversity, encourage youth to work for their country, and heal the country. Trump sat hunched over as Clinton spoke, scowling and rocking back and forth, before using his own tag line, “Make American Great Again,” to remark on everything he was fed up with in Washington and the potential he saw as being wasted by those in power.

After only five minutes, the moderators brought up Trump’s remarks on the Access Hollywood tape. Cooper asked whether Trump understood the weight of his statements. After excusing his remarks as “locker room talk,” Trump turned around and started speaking about ISIS beheadings and saying that the country needed to “move on to bigger things.” Clinton responded that she found Trump’s comments unacceptable and not reflective of her vision of the United States. Trump asked the moderators for a chance to respond, and claimed that “it’s just words, folks.”

Despite Trump’s efforts to shift the attention off the Access Hollywood tape, moderators continued to ask about it, taking a question from the audience about how he had changed since 2005. Again, he went back to the “locker room talk” excuse and this time made personal attacks

⁶ All quotations in this section are taken directly from statements made by Clinton and Trump during the October 9, 2016 Town Hall Debate at Washington University, St. Louis, unless otherwise indicated. See Clinton 2016 and Trump 2016.

against Bill Clinton. Hillary recalled Michelle Obama's famous words, "when they go low, we go high," and called upon Trump to take responsibility for his actions.

The attacks against the Clintons did not stop there. Trump accused Hillary of winning the Democratic primary unfairly and redirected the conversation to her emails. Clinton remained calm and even smiled as Trump threatened to hire a special prosecutor to prosecute her on the basis of the email scandal. "There has never been so many lies, so much deception; there has never been anything like it [sic]," he said. Clinton implored the audience to go to the fact-checker on her website, claiming that everything Trump said was false and that "it's awfully good that someone with the temperament of Donald Trump is not in charge of the law in our country." He responded, "Because you'd be in jail." His supporters laughed and cheered at this response, prompting Cooper to ask the audience to remain quiet for the duration of the debate.

When the topic of the debate shifted to Clinton's emails, she apologized for her mistake but reiterated that no breach of security occurred during her tenure as Secretary of State. After the moderator went to move on, Trump launched into accusations that Clinton was lying, that Congress allowed Clinton to get away with bad behavior, and that Clinton should be in jail. During Clinton's response, Trump repeatedly interrupted, and Cooper requested Trump allow Clinton to finish, remarking that she did not speak over him. Even as Clinton said, "that's true, I didn't," Trump interrupted again, saying "because you have nothing to say."

Finally, Clinton addressed Trump directly, launching an attack of her own. "Okay, Donald," she said, "I know you're into big diversion tonight, anything to avoid talking about your campaign and the way it's exploding, and the way Republicans are leaving you, but let's at least focus on some of the issues." Trump commented "one on three" after the moderators moved on, insinuating that the moderators were ganging up on him in favor of Clinton.

The dialogue shifted to the Affordable Care Act with an audience question. The moderators handed Clinton the chance to respond first, as Trump had responded first to the previous question, but after Trump tried to begin speaking, she said, "no go ahead, if he wants to start, he can start." Calling himself a "gentleman," he allowed Clinton the first response.

At this point, both candidates were seeming to lose some of their composure. Clinton's responses devolved more into Trump-centered rhetoric as she lost some of the focus on her own campaign themes. Trump's behavior became more restless. Although he was calmer than in the first debate, he did use his body language to attempt to establish dominance. Pacing, panting, and eventually looming behind Clinton, he seemed to try to establish himself as the more physically dominant candidate on stage and draw attention away from Clinton. He repeatedly pointed at her, a gesture widely interpreted as aggressive (Uhrmacher and Gaimo 2016). When he did return to his side off the stage, he stood behind his chair with his hands and arms leaning on the back.

Clinton, on the other hand, remained seated while Trump answered questions, taking on a much less aggressive persona. When answering, she moved around the whole space of the stage, addressing voters on all sides. Her answers to questions were frequently interrupted by Trump. However, Clinton smiled during some of Trump's answers, walking a fine line between a sense of preparation, confidence, positivity, and superiority.

Trump's behavior reached its peak of aggression during Clinton's response to the question regarding the Affordable Care Act. Trump could be seen standing just over her shoulder. Clinton remarked in her memoir of the 2016 campaign that she was hyperaware of his presence (Clinton 2017). Two days after hearing him openly brag about grabbing women by the pussy, he followed her closely around the small stage, making faces and staring at her as she spoke. "He was literally breathing down my neck. My skin crawled" (Clinton 2017, 136). Knowing what she knew so well

about the fine line she was walking and her identity as a woman reaching to occupy one of the most historically masculinized offices in the country's history, Clinton had to decide whether to call Trump out for his behavior, telling him to back off and give her space, or remain quiet and finish the answer, pretending to ignore his antagonistic presence behind her. Beyond just this moment, however, Clinton had to consider the weight that was resting on her campaign as the first woman to make such major strides in American politics. As two hundreds of years of history were brought to bear on these few months, she found herself teetering between too aggressive and too soft, and in this moment, she had a choice to make.

Epilogue

Clinton contained herself. She continued explaining the issues she saw with the ACA and detailing the steps she would take to rectify them. She did not tell Trump to back off. Even as the debate wore on, she maintained her collected demeanor, and many journalists and observers would later claim Clinton as the champion of the debate.

She later wrote, however, about the double bind in which she found herself. "It was one of those moments where you wish you could hit pause and ask everyone watching, 'well? What would you do?'" Faced with the option to either continue speaking as though she was unbothered or tell Trump to back up, Clinton chose the former, "aided by a lifetime of dealing with difficult men trying to throw [her] off." She did wonder whether she should have chosen the latter option, thinking "maybe I have overlearned the lesson of staying calm...determined to present a composed face to the world" (Clinton 2017, 137).

Less than a month later, Trump earned 304 electoral votes, winning the presidency, although Clinton won the popular vote by 2.8 million votes (Begley 2016). Fifty two percent of white women voted for Trump (Bump 2018). The physical glass ceiling that her campaign managers had prepared to sit overhead during her acceptance speech remained intact⁷. In her concession speech, Clinton reminded the country of her deep belief in America's ability to come together and move forward. She also called on her supporters and those who had fought for her campaign to continue working for what they believe in and make their voices heard. "Now, I know we have still not shattered that highest and hardest glass ceiling, but some day, someone will, and hopefully sooner than we might think right now. And to all the little girls who are watching this, never doubt that you are valuable and powerful and deserving of every chance and opportunity in the world to pursue and achieve your own dreams."

Two months after Election Day, Trump was sworn in, a ceremony which Clinton attended. Tradition dictates that living former presidents and first ladies attend inaugurations, but Clinton "struggled for weeks" deciding whether to go. Ultimately, she decided that she "felt a responsibility to be there" (Clinton 2017, 4). Clinton and her husband sat with former President George W. Bush and Laura Bush.

The day after Trump's inauguration, Americans gathered around the country in the largest protest in United States history, the Women's March. Five million citizens of all backgrounds stood together in nonviolent protest to call for a just and equitable society (Women's March n.d.). Two years later, in the 2018 midterm elections, Democrats took back a majority in the House of Representatives. The record turnout was termed by some, the Blue, Pink, and Rainbow Wave.

⁷ Clinton reserved the Jacob Javits Convention Center in Manhattan for her victory party in November 2016. The ceiling of the venue is made of glass, which Clinton hoped to use as a nod to the symbolic glass ceiling that she would have shattered by winning the presidency. See Clinton 2017 for more information.

In the 2018 midterms, 36 new women won seats in the House, overcoming a previous record set in 1992, the so-called Year of the Woman. Among the historic victories were the first two Muslim American women (Ilhan Omar and Rashida Talib), and the first two Native American women (Deb Haaland and Sharice Davis) elected to Congress. Texas elected its first two Hispanic Congresswomen (Veronica Escobar and Sylvia Garcia), and Massachusetts and Connecticut elected their first black Congresswomen (Ayanna Pressley and Jahana Hayes). Tennessee elected its first woman to the Senate, Marsha Blackburn. Maine and South Dakota elected their first female governors, Janet Mills and Kristi Noem (Lu and Collins 2018). Colorado elected the first openly gay governor in the United States, Jared Polis. Over 150 LGBTQ+ candidates were elected in 2018, more than in any other previous election (Caron 2018; Zraick 2018). As the 2020 presidential election approaches and more women are certain to enter the race against the incumbent President Trump, the media and the public must seriously reckon with how we talk about women in politics. We must make space for women to lead outside of the traditional binary norms that have been modified little in the two hundred years since our country's founding. We must let go of the expectation that only certain types of men and even fewer types of women are fit to hold power.

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